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WASHINGTON — Defense

Secretary Robert M. Gates, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton and the nation's top military officer on Wednesday laid out a muscular defense of President Obama's decision to send 30,000 additional troops to Afghanistan, but they made clear that his plan to begin withdrawing those forces by July 2011 was flexible.

At two hearings on Capitol Hill, where they faced deep skepticism about different parts of Mr. Obama's war plan from both parties, they also said that the arrival of the additional forces, while speedy, would not be as fast as Mr. Obama suggested in a speech to the nation on Tuesday night.

Although most of the additional troops would arrive in Afghanistan in the first six months of next year, as the president announced, Adm. Mike Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said they would not all be in place until the fall of 2010.

At the same time, American diplomats said that NATO allies had expressed surprise at Mr. Obama's commitment to begin withdrawing by July 2011. Richard C. Holbrooke, the administration's special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, met Wednesday with officials from several countries to explain the president's thinking, similar to what Mr. Gates, Mrs. Clinton and Admiral Mullen were doing before Congress.

The Democrat who leads the House defense appropriations subcommittee, Representative John P. Murtha of Pennsylvania, said Wednesday that he expected the White House to seek \$40 billion by the spring to pay for the additional troops, or \$10 billion more a year than the president estimated in his speech. Administration officials said they did not support efforts of some Democrats in Congress to pay for the additional troops with a surtax on incomes, meaning that war costs would continue to add to the deficit.

In a full day of testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee and the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Mr. Gates, Mrs. Clinton and Admiral Mullen faced repeated criticism that the target date to begin withdrawals — less than a year after all the 30,000 troops arrive — would be an invitation to Al Qaeda and the Taliban to prepare and plan.

Senator John McCain, Republican of Arizona, started the day by grilling Mr. Gates and Admiral Mullen, and said it made no sense to set an exit date if the withdrawal was also going to be based on conditions on the ground, as the president said in his speech.

Eight hours later on the House side, Mr. Gates was still answering the same question when he said: "I have adamantly opposed deadlines. I opposed them in Iraq, and I oppose deadlines in Afghanistan." In Afghanistan, he said, "This will be a gradual process."

The American commander in Afghanistan, Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal, made the same point while speaking to reporters in Kabul, the Afghan capital. He said he was "absolutely supportive of the timeline" laid out by Mr. Obama, but he also cautioned that the timeline was flexible and "is not an absolute."

"It's not, 'At 18 months, everybody leaves,' the general said.

The July 2011 date, Mr. Gates, Mrs. Clinton and Admiral Mullen said, was in large part meant to be a wake-up call to the Afghans that the United States would not be in the country forever. "How do you demonstrate resolve and at the same time convey a sense of urgency to the Afghans that they must step up to the plate and begin to take responsibility for their own security and to protect their own country against the extremists?" Mr. Gates told the House committee.

Although members of both parties expressed doubts about the war plan, there were few political fireworks. Representative Dana Rohrabacher, a California Republican who opposes the war, dismissed Mr. Obama's strategy as "maybe a different facade, but it's the same old policy."

Over all, the hearings had little of the drama that characterized Capitol Hill hearings on the war in Iraq. In the morning, Senator Evan Bayh, Democrat of Indiana, offered his congratulations to Mrs. Clinton on the engagement of her daughter, Chelsea.

The hearings did offer a glimpse of a few details and some of the thinking behind the president's strategy. The testimony from the three officials showed that the White House would keep to its longstanding goal to build up the Afghan security forces to 240,000 by 2011, and not expand to 400,000 as General McChrystal had proposed.

Senator Carl Levin, the Michigan Democrat who has been a proponent of training more Afghan security forces, showed his own skepticism on that issue, and questioned whether sending so many additional troops might keep the Afghans from building up their security forces on their own. "Where I have questions is whether the rapid deployment of a large number of U.S. combat forces, without an adequate number of Afghan security forces for our troops to partner with, serves that mission," he said.

In his opening statement, Mr. Gates, who pushed for the 30,000 additional American troops and was singled out by the White House as influential in Mr. Obama's decision, sharply differed with some of Mr. Obama's advisers who have argued that the United States should focus on rooting out Al Qaeda from Pakistan, and that the Taliban in Afghanistan do not present a serious long-term threat to the national security of the United States.

On the contrary, Mr. Gates said, Al Qaeda and the Taliban are inextricably linked.

“While Al Qaeda is under great pressure now and dependent on the Taliban and other extremist groups for sustainment, the success of the Taliban would vastly strengthen Al Qaeda’s message, to the Muslim world, that violent extremists are on the winning side of history,” Mr. Gates said.

He added, “The Taliban and Al Qaeda have become symbiotic, each benefiting from the success and mythology of the other.”

When pressed by Senator Susan Collins, Republican of Maine, on why the United States had to invest so much military power and money in Afghanistan when Al Qaeda still had the ability to establish havens in other countries, Mr. Gates replied that Afghanistan was unique.

Not only was it the place where the 2001 attacks against the United States were planned, he said, it “is still the wellspring of inspiration for extremist jihadism everywhere.”

He said that the “guidance and strategic leadership” for Al Qaeda came from the group’s leaders who were in the border area with Pakistan, and that there was an “unholy alliance” that had developed in the past year between Al Qaeda, the Taliban in Pakistan and the Taliban in Afghanistan.

He added, “If anything, the situation, I think, is more serious today than it was a year ago because of the attacks of the Taliban in Pakistan on Pakistan, and the effort of Al Qaeda in collusion with the Taliban in Pakistan to try and destabilize Pakistan itself.”

Reporting was contributed by Jackie Calmes, Christopher Drew and Mark Landler from Washington, and Richard A. Oppel Jr. from Kabul, Afghanistan.